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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether a perceiver would distinguish between nonverbal messages sent with greater or lesser intent and the extent to which this correlated with the messages' general affect. Sixty-two students were recruited from communication courses at a large southwestern university to participate in a "conversation study." None had taken a course in nonverbal communication. Each student participated in a two-person interview in which a confederate, whom students thought was merely another participant, was instructed to manipulate both the intent and the valence of his or her nonverbal messages. Results indicated that participants saw most negative messages as intentionally sent while positive messages were seen as more unintentional. Positive behaviors were also viewed as directed toward the perceiver and resulted in more socially favorable evaluations of the message sender. Likewise, intent did not affect the readability of nonverbal messages, and perceivers were able to distinguish equally between positive and negative messages that were encoded with greater or lesser intent. Individuals sending positive messages, however, were interpreted as being more competent and evaluated more favorably than those sending negative messages. Intent had no significant impact on social perceptions. (Forty references are attached.) (Author/KEH)

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The Biased Perceiver:
Correlations of Nonverbal Message Valence and Intent

Paper presented at the Speech Communication Conference, San Francisco, November 1989.

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Abstract

This study deals with whether a perceiver will distinguish between nonverbal messages sent with greater or lesser intent and the extent to which this correlates with the messages' general affect. Despite evidence that largely purposeful nonverbal behaviors are different from those encoded more spontaneously, participants (N=62) saw most negative messages as intentionally sent while positive messages were seen as more unintentional. Positive behaviors were also viewed as directed toward the perceiver and resulted in more socially favorable evaluations of the message sender. The protection of the perceiver's self-esteem is suggested to account partially for these results. Likewise, intent did not affect the readabililty of nonverbal messages, and perceivers were able to distinguish equally between positive and negative messages that were encoded with greater or lesser intent. Individuals sending positive messages, however, were interpreted as being more competent and evaluated more favorably than those sending negative messages. Intent had no significant impact on social perceptions.

The Biased Perceiver:

Correlations of Nonverbal Message Valence and Intent

Interest in the cognitive structures that affect communication has become more commonplace in research on message behavior (Berger & Roloff, 1982; Hewes & Planalp, 1987; Greene, 1984). Within this, the role of cognitions in the creation and processing of nonverbal behavior has received notable attention (e.g., Ickes, Tooke, Stinson, Baker, & Bissonnette, 1988; O'Connor & Gifford, 1988). Of particular interest for scholars attempting to understand the nature of nonverbal message phenomena is an investigation regarding the extent to which the intentionality or deliberateness of behavior correlates with the cognitive processes involved in encoding and decoding nonverbal messages (Buck, 1982; 1984; Motley, 1986; Motley & Camden, 1988).

Following the belief that nonverbal cues may be sent with various degrees of intent from highly presentational (intended) to more representational (unintended) (Knapp, Wiemann, & Daly, 1978), a number of researchers have attempted to find cognitive processes that can distinguish between the two endpoints of this intent continuum. Buck (1982; 1984; Buck & Duffy, 1980), for example, asserted that spontaneous emotional expressions differ from more intended messages in that the former exists to reflect motivational and emotional states while the latter "occurs in the direct service

of the symbolic stream of communication" (Buck, 1982, p. 38). Further, these two modes of nonverbal behavior are controlled by different motor systems. While biologically related, spontaneous nonverbal behaviors are thought to be encoded by the right brain, and symbolic messages are associated with left hemispheric processing.

Motley and Camden (1988) also distinguished between the cognitive processing of what they deemed symbolic (intentional) and conditioned response (unintentional) nonverbal behaviors. The authors concluded that, "the physical output of intentionally transmitted messages is preceded by an encoding process which includes cognitive operations to optimize the appropriateness of the message output for the intended meaning" (p. 4). Because of this encoding process, emotional messages sent with more communicative intent are less ambiguous than those sent spontaneously. Further, and most important for communication scholars interested in the effects of diverse cognitive processes, decoders in an experimental setting could differentiate between the output of these processes.

The next step in this line of investigation is to center on the extent to which interactants will "pick up" and use the output of diverse cognitions within social contexts. This paper will therefore explore whether decoders note the behavioral manifestations of cognitive differences while communicating with others as well as investigating possible consequences that stem

from this observation. With the predominance of motivational biases in the perceptual process, particularly when one is involved in an interaction rather than just observing it (Crittenden & Wiley, 1985; Knight & Vallacher, 1981), however, it cannot be assumed that interactants will distinguish between intended and unintended messages in an objective manner. It is the goal of this paper to explore the possibility that, despite the different physical properties of spontaneously versus intentionally sent messages, perceivers may note intentionality not by virtue of its physical characteristics but, rather, in ways that reflect some of these perceptual biases. Specifically, it will be argued that a message's affect may be more important than its intent in determining a decoder's response.

Encoding and accurately decoding emotions

Perhaps because of its importance in definitional debates surrounding communicative behavior (see for example, Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989, pp. 11-20), a number of scholars have attempted to distinguish between purposefully and unintentionally sent nonverbal behaviors. Most of the research on encoding differences has focused on facial expressions of emotion, both on a micro and a macro level. Ekman and Friesen (Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Ekman, Friesen, & O'Sullivan, 1988; Ekman, Hagar, & Friesen, 1981), for instance, were interested in the microexpressions that distinguish intended from unintended facial cues and found that

"felt" (spontaneous) and "false" (deliberate) smiles differed from one another. Using the Facial Action Coding System (Ekman & Friesen, 1978), Ekman, Hagar, and Friesen (1981) noted that deliberate smiles were more often one-sided while spontaneous expressions were more facially symmetric. Ekman, Friesen, and O'Sullivan (1988) later found that felt smiles involved greater muscular involvement of the encoder's eyes and a more upturned mouth than false smiles.

On a more macro level, Wagner, MacDonald, and Manstead (1986) looked at whether the high accuracy level for decoding facial expressions found in research using posed behaviors (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1975) would hold up with spontaneously sent expressions. They noted that, "although emotion recognition significantly exceeded chance levels in three emotion categories, namely anger, disgust, and happiness, receivers' judgments were in general rather inaccurate" (Wagner et al., 1986, p. 740). In fact, decoding accuracy for surprised expressions was significantly below that expected by chance. Overall the researchers concluded that the accuracy for decoding spontaneous emotional expressions cannot be argued with much confidence. Research by Buck, Savin, Miller, and Caul (1972), Felleman, Barden, Carlson, Rosenberg, and Masters (1983), Fujita, Harper, and Wiens (1980), and Harper, Wiens, and Matarazzo (1979) had comparable results.

More recently, Motley and Camden (1988) claimed that, while spontaneous and controlled behaviors appear to be encoded

differently from one another as previous research suggests, the methodologies of earlier studies were somewhat artificial in that they did not involve behaviors encoded within interpersonal interactions nor did they necessarily deal with content typical of dyadic contexts. With messages created during interactions, Motley and Camden concluded that people are no better than chance at interpreting the spontaneously sent emotions of others, except in the case of happiness. At best, perceivers can make global assessments of the positiveness or negativeness of an emotion. Motley and Camden's findings echoed those of previous research in that spontaneous expressions are more ambiguous than deliberate messages, but they concluded that, in interactional contexts, people are even less able to decode emotional expressions than was believed previously.

The consensus from most recent work on nonverbal emotional expressions, then, is that encoders send intentional and unintentional messages in different ways and that decoders are able to note differences between the two message modes. In particular, spontaneous behaviors are more ambiguous and harder to interpret than deliberate cues of emotions. Further, certain emotions are more difficult to decode than are others (Felleman et al., 1983; Stifter & Fox, 1987; Wagner et al., 1986). In general, however, people can conclude correctly if a message reflects a pleasant or unpleasant emotion, labeled the behaviors' "general affective tone" (Buck et al., 1972; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), although

presumably this would be somewhat easier for purposefully versus unintentionally sent messages. More specific labels of individual emotions, however, are far less clear with spontaneously sent cues.

Implications for encoder

Intent. Although most of the research on nonverbal intent has dealt with facial expressions of emotions, Allen and Atkinson (1981) looked for more global assessments of intent and their relation to cues denoting comprehension. The researchers found that behaviors (e.g., head nodding) occurred more frequently when "understanding cues" were sent deliberately rather than naturally. This redundancy resulted in attributions that the cues involved in purposefully sent messages were compressed and produced caricatures of actual understanding. While the messages were more easily decoded when sent deliberately, they were also seen as "poor stylistic constructions." Research by Buck (1975) and Morris (1977) corroborate the findings that deliberate behaviors can be seen as less "appropriate" or as "overkill" when compared to spontaneously occurring behavior. These results suggest that, while accuracy is increased, purposeful nonverbal messages may be evaluated more negatively than behaviors encoded spontaneously.

This negative evaluation based on intentional nonverbal cues may extend to the perceiver's view of the message's sender. Recently, O'Connor and Gifford (1988) looked for the effects of distance violations on such social evaluation. In particular, the

researchers wanted to see how sitting close either by choice (intentional) or by force (unintentional) would alter the evaluations made by participants. Confederates either moved close to the participant or sat in an unmovable chair that was near the subject. The participants rated negatively only those who appeared to intend the violation.

Affect. The intent of behaviors may not be alone in influencing perceivers' evaluations of an encoder. Jones and Davis (1965), for example, concluded that the valence (positiveness or negativeness) of a message may also have an impact on evaluations of the message sender. When discussing a message's hedonic relevance (i.e., the extent to which it has motivational consequences for a receiver), the researchers argued that positive messages increase a perceiver's favorable disposition toward another. Conversely, negative actions lead to less favorable evaluations. In addition to the personal assessments made based on the "naturalness" of their behavior, interactants may be judged on the affect of the message they are sending.

These last two research lines, while not yet well-developed, build from the conclusions of the former. The level of intent and "general affective tone" may do more than distinguish between patterns of encoding. The ends of each continuum may have consequences for the sender of these messages. To further investigate the role of the perceiver in this process, discussion

will now focus on the decoding of actual intent behind nonverbal messages.

Decoding Levels of Intent

In the above studies, participants were asked to distinguish between emotions sent with various degrees of intent. In general, those behaviors encoded deliberately could be distinguished from spontaneous cues in both form (Allen & Atkinson, 1981; Ekman et al., 1988) and content (Buck et al., 1972; Wagner et al., 1986). Motley and Camden's (1988) observation about the non-interactional contexts of previous research brings forward an important question, however: within actual interactions, do people distinguish between intended and unintended messages of emotions?

Although Motley and Camden's research took a step forward in that their stimulus materials (photographs) were taken during "ostensibly natural conversations," participants who looked at the photographs to determine the nature of the emotion being sent were not part of the interaction. Knight and Vallacher (1981) argued that the attributions made for another's actions depend largely on whether or not the perceiver is, or believes he or she is, involved in the interaction. Specifically, people attempt to make interpretations about the cause of a message in a way that allows them to be responsible for the positive messages sent by another but discourages such accounts for negative behaviors (Jones & Davis, 1965).

Similarly, Wright and Dawson (1988) found that the significance of another's behaviors to an observer affected the degree to which the decoder assessed the messages of his or her partner accurately. For instance, perceivers were more sensitive to aggressive than withdrawn behaviors presumably because the former are more likely to affect the perceiver's outcomes. These researchers argued that people make inferential shortcomings when deciding the meaning for others' actions and that this "bounded rationality" is dictated by the degree to which the message is utilitarian for the observer.

These studies suggest that social interactants are not objective in their views of others' behaviors. The research does not, however, focus on the ways in which perceptual biases influence assumptions about another's intent. Recently, however, Manusov and Rodriguez (1989) tested the assumption that being in an interaction affects interpretations made for the intent behind another's nonverbal messages. Within a field setting, participants spoke to bank employees about the possibilitity of opening an account. Following the interaction, the respondents were asked various questions regarding the nature of the nonspoken messages (positive or negative), the cause of the behavior (internal or external to the employee), and the perceived intent behind the messages. Overall, positively labeled messages were seen to be intentionally encoded while negative messages were viewed as unintentionally sent. In those instances where a negative message

was labeled as intentional, an external pressure was given to account for the intended "snub." Further, there was no indication that the employees were expected to act in a positive manner by virtue of their vocation. Instead, participants felt that they were the specific target of the employees' positive messages.

Manusov and Rodriguez concluded that the perceivers were affected by cognitive motivations to protect their self-esteem (see also Crittenden & Wiley, 1985; Forsyth, 1980), and these motivations influenced the way that the interactants decoded the messages of their interaction partner. Rather than seeing what may have "actually" taken place, perceivers seemed to interpret nonverbal messages in ways that reflected the importance of their own needs and motivations.

While interesting, the conclusions drawn by Manusov and Rodriguez (1989) are not completely convincing. In their study, no assessment could be made as to the degree that actual intent played a role. Possibly the positive messages <u>were</u> sent deliberately while the negative messages were sent without intent. Further, because the interaction occurred within a "real life" setting, the extent to which attributions of intent were affected by the verbal messages of the employees could not be determined. The researchers called for a controlled study that could help discount the alternative hypotheses unaccounted for in their initial research.

The following study attempted to answer some of the questions left open by Manusov and Rodriguez. Following the research on decoding of intentionality as well as the finding that being in an interaction leads to perceptual biases, the following hypotheses were introduced and tested in the present study:

H1: Participants will be able to differentiate between positive and negative affect but distinctions will be easier with intentional than with unintentional messages.

H2: Negative messages will be seen as unintentional while positive messages will be labeled intentional.

H3: Positive messages will be seen as directed more toward the perceiver than will negative messages.

H4: Negative messages and messages sent with intent will be more likely to result in negative attributions of competence, social evaluation, and self-confidence than will positive and spontaneously sent messages.

Method

Participants

Respondents in this study included 62 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large southwestern university. None of these students had taken a course in nonverbal communication. Each participant received extra credit for his or her involvement in the study.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from classes to take part in a "conversation study." They were told that the experimenter was interested in the differences between formal and informal interactions. When they arrived at the research site, the participants were instructed that the focus that day was on formal interactions and that either they or their partner would be responsible for reading a list of interview-type questions to the other. In reality, all participants were in the same conversation "treatment." They were, however, randomly assigned to one of four conditions relevant to this study: 1) positive/intentional; 2) positive/unintentional; 3) negative/intentional; and 4) negative/unintentional.

Another "participant" was already seated at the entrance to the experiment room. This person was actually a confederate who acted as if he or she was a study volunteer. After both individuals signed consent forms, the experimenter pretended to

make a choice between the two to decide who would ask and who would answer the questions. The confederate was always chosen to ask the questions.

The pair was then escorted into a room. There they were told that they would have a chance to practice the interview once before they would be taken to another room and filmed. So that the participant could hear, the experimenter instructed the confederate to "stick to the questions" provided in order that each interview would be essentially the same. This allowed for control over the verbal content of each interaction. Further, during their training period, it was made clear to the confederates that they must keep their verbal behavior consistent across all of the encounters.

The pair was told to come out when they had completed the run though, and they would be given further instructions at that time. The experimenter then left the room. For the course of the interaction, the confederate read the questions as written. These questions were created to be relatively neutral in content and included such things as "Where is your hometown?" and "What do you plan to do when you graduate?"

During the interaction, the confederate manipulated both the intent and the valence of his or her nonverbal messages. During a subset of these interactions, another pair (trained coders) were given simultaneous instructions and were in the room at the same time as the confederate and participant. While going through the interview questions, the coders also watched the confederate's

behaviors to determine whether or not he or she was using the assigned manipulations. This method was chosen over videotaping or using a one-way mirror in order to discourage expectations based on laboratory observation.

Following the interaction, the participants were escorted to a nearby room to complete a questionnaire assessing the perceived intent and valence of their partner's nonverbal messages as well as a number of items concerning their evaluation of the confederate. The participants were then debriefed following the completion of the questionnaire. In particular, those in the negative conditions received repeated information that the negative messages were sent only because the confederate was instructed to do so. No respondent appeared to be negatively affected by the interaction once he or she was debriefed. Those in the positive conditions were not told as explicitly that the behavior they received was not oriented toward them.

Independent Variables

Intent. Although intentionality is discussed commonly in scholarly inquiry on communication behavior, it remains an elusive issue both conceptually and operationally. At a definitional level, intent is difficult to identify because of the ambiguous role of both control and consciousness (Andersen, 1986) and the impact of social constraints on behavior (Bowers, Metts, & Duncanson, 1985). Most communication researchers who define intent

as part of communicative behavior, however, see at least some level of consciousness as integral to their conceptualization of intentionality (Bowers & Bradac, 1984).

Other researchers have questioned whether spontaneous and intentional behaviors should be seen as dichotomous or are better viewed as a continuum, with any given behavior having a particular degree of intent (Cronkhite, 1986; Motley, 1986). Knapp et al. (1978), for example, state that:

> We do have experiences that defy this "either-or" classification of intent. As a sender, you may be aware that your behavior caused another person to dislike you, but you can't be sure in your own mind the extent to which your behavior was consciously planned....As a receiver, you may feel a person has been rude to you, but the extent to which the person "didn't know any better" or wanted you to feel bad is not clear (p. 273).

Conceptualizations of intent must therefore have, at the least, some incorporation of consciousness as well as the belief that messages are determined typically as having a certain degree of intent rather than being spontaneous or purposeful. Operationalizing this definition is as difficult as gaining consensus for it, however. At least in the area of nonverbal emotional expressions, the traditional way to operationalize voluntary (intentional) actions was to ask participants to pose different expressions, while spontaneous affect states were generated by making people actually feel certain emotions (see Ekman, 1979). While this worked for the creation of photographs

perceived later by other participants, manipulating intent during interactions is an even greater challenge.

Acting with a high degree of intentionality poses less of an empirical problem than does eliciting more spontaneous actions within a dyadic encounter. In the present study, confederates (three females and three males) were trained to concentrate on and control their behaviors during the more intentional "condition." The focus was on the conscious manipulation of certain behaviors for an intended purpose. This conceptualization of intentionality is consistent with other accounts (e.g., Bowers & Bradac, 1984; Motley & Camden, 1988).

For the spontaneous "treatments," however, operationalization was more difficult. In this study, confederates in the spontaneous conditions were trained to concentrate solely on feeling positive or negative. The behaviors that resulted from this feeling were deemed to be, at least, more unintentional than in the intended treatments.

Buck (1982) suggested that having confederates try to "feel" a certain emotion falls further toward the purposive than the spontaneous end of the intent continuum because the affect state is contrived. The extent to which this assessment is valid, however, is uncertain. While there is some voluntariness in trying to feel a given way, the behaviors that stem from the concentration on a certain emotion are not under the consciousness or control of

the user. The behaviors perceived by an interaction partner are, therefore, deemed to be relatively spontaneous.

Valence. Operationalizing messages' affect poses less of a problem than creating a methodology for intent. In this study, confederates were trained over the period of several weeks in the use of nonverbal behaviors associated with positive and negative affect. Positive behaviors included smiling, forward lean, head nods, eye contact, pleasant vocal tone, and open body position. These cues are commonly associated with positive affect and immediacy (Coker & Burgoon, 1987). Conversely, negative actions involved lack of eye gaze, use of adaptors, backwards lean, sidewards body orientation, closed arms, and unpleasant face and voice.

These behaviors were used consciously only in the intentional condition. As mentioned, for the more spontaneous conditions, confederates were trained to take their focus off of the behaviors and concentrate on their feeling state. Again, the confederates had several practice sessions to allow them to feel the condition more "naturally."

Dependent Variables

The questionnaire completed by the participants following the interaction included items that measured the variables of interest in this project as well as others included to take the focus away from the goals of the study.

Intent. Perceived intent was measured with two semantic differential items equated with the previous definition of intentionality. On a scale of 1 to 7, respondents answered the degree to which the nonverbal behaviors of their partner across the interaction were intentional (1) or unintentional (7) and conscious (1) or unconscious (7). This measures degree of perceived intent.

Valence. Perceptions of the affective state relayed across the nonverbal messages of the confederates were measured by three items based on Likert-type scales. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they disagreed (1) or agreed (7) with the statements. These included whether the partner's behaviors were generally positive, desirable, and nice.

Direction. Within the questionnaire, respondents were asked the degree to which their partner's behaviors were directed toward them (the perceiver) rather than being due to the situation or the sender's basic personality. This was measured on one seven-point scale where 1 meant disagree and 7 meant agree.

Perception of confederate. According to Tetlock (1980), there are three general areas covering potential dispositional attributions. These include competence (made up of assessments of creativity, originality, skill, activeness, imagination, organization, competency, and the ability to inspire), social evaluation (assessed through measures of responsibility, openness to criticism, ethical integrity, likeability, flexibility, modesty,

and humility), and self-confidence (viewed as self-confidence and arrogance). The respondents were asked to rate their beliefs about their partner on seven-point bipolar scales (e.g., honest to dishonest) where 1 indicated positive evaluations and 7 signified negative terms.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Coders used scales to assess the degree to which the confederate was sending intentional or unintentional messages (semantic differentials including intended/unintended, purposeful/spontaneous, and controlled/reactive) and message valence (cold/warm, bad/good, negative/positive). The correlations between condition and intent and for condition and valence were .79 and .84 respectively. Interrater reliabilities were .77 for intent and .87 for valence.

Reliabilities

Alpha reliabilities were done for the intent and valence scales. The results were .83 and .96 respectively. Tetlock's three disposition scales were also checked for their reliability. Alphas were .78 for competence (when oppenness to criticism was removed), .91 for social evaluation, and .48 for the two-item self-confidence scale. Because the reliability for the latter measure was so low, it was not included in subsequent analyses.

Tests of the Hypotheses

A 2X2 ANOVA was conducted with confederate intent and valence as the independent variables and perceived valence as the dependent variable. The results showed a significant main effect for valence only (F=122.3, df=1, 61, p<.001, eta2=.66). Across intent conditions, positive messages were seen as sending more pleasant affect (M=20.1) than negative messages (M=9.65). The interaction predicted in hypothesis 1 was therefore not confirmed.

A second ANOVA was run for confederate intent and valence as independent variables on perceived intent in order to test hypothesis 2. The results showed a main effect for actual valence but not for level of intent (F=5.188, df=1, 61, p<.02, eta2=.08). Against what was predicted, positive behaviors were seen to be less intentionally sent (M=8.9) than negative messages (M=7.8), where lower numbers indicate greater perceived intent.

Third a t-test was conducted with directedness of message as the dependent variable and message valence as the independent variable. It was significant (t=5.99, df=61, p<.001, eta2=.36) with positive messages (M=6.23) being seen as directed at the respondent more often than negative messages (M=3.74). This supports hypothesis 3.

Finally, two ANOVAs were run with actual intent and valence as the independent variables and the two reliable dispositional classifications as the dependent variables. The results partially

supported the hypothesis. With low numbers indicating more positive attributions, confederates sending positive messages were seen as more competent (M=16.39) than those who encoded negative messages (M=22.77) (F=15.6, df=1, 61, p<.001, eta2=.04). There was no significant interaction nor a main effect for intent, although there was a trend (p<.09) for the independent effect of intent, with those sending purposeful messages seen as more competent than those using more spontaneous cues. For social evaluation, there was also a significant main effect for message valence (F=95.82, df=1, 61, p<.001, eta2=.59) but none for intent nor was there a significant interaction. In this case, as before, those who sent positive messages were evaluated more favorably (M=28.48) than those in the negative condition (M=42.77). This provided partial support for hypothesis 4.

Discussion

The present study was designed to measure the correlation of a person's general affect with the degree of intentionality behind his or her nonverbal messages and the effect of this relationship on the perception made by others during interactions. It was hypothesized that participants would be able to tell the difference between positive and negative nonverbal messages despite the form of encoding (more intentional or spontaneous) but that this would be more efficient when the messages were sent purposefully.

Further, it was argued that the level of intent behind nonverbal messages would be perceived in a way that would maintain the self-esteem of the receiver (i.e., that he or she would see nonverbal messages as more intentional and directed toward him or her and interpret negative messages as more unintentional and not as perceiver-oriented). Finally, it was suggested that the general affect communicated to another as well as the level of purposefulness behind the nonverbal behaviors used by an interactant would influence the evaluations made about the message sender.

In general, people were able to read overall affective tone whether or not nonverbal messages were sent purposefully. Although it was argued that the ease of decoding would be aided by the deliberateness of certain messages, this was not confirmed. As has been argued elsewhere (Buck, 1984; Motley & Camden, 1988), people are able to read the overall tone of a message (or, in this case, a series of messages) even when the message is sent without clear conscious intent.

Second, participants appeared to make attributions in a manner that protected their self-esteem, but they did not do so precisely as hypothesized. While the participants assumed that their interaction partners sent positive messages to <u>them</u> rather than because of certain situational demands or personality dispositions, the respondents did not see positive messages as more intentional

and negative messages as less intended as predicted. Instead, the opposite pattern occurred.

Finally, as hypothesized, those sending messages of positive affect were evaluated more favorably than those who encoded negative messages. In particular, confederates received higher ratings in competence and social evaluation when encoding messages with positive valence. Degree of intent did not significantly affect the evaluations made about the sender, although there was a trend to see those who sent messages more intentionally as being higher in competence than those whose messages were more spontaneously encoded. This trend went against what was hypothesized.

Overall the affect of nonverbal messages played a more significant role in the decoding and interpretation processes of the participants in this study than did the intentionality of the messages, as predicted. The most unexpected finding was the pattern found for attributions of perceived intent and message valence. Unlike previous research, participants believed that others were not aware of nor were purposefully sending positive messages but were conscious of and intended to send their negative cues. Yet, consistent with predictions, the respondents assumed their interaction partners directed positive but not negative messages at the recipient.

A possible account for this finding is that there is a norm which suggests that people are supposed to be "nice." The

completion of this norm may be seen as automatic and not encoded with conscious intent. To send a negative message is a violation of what is expected; it is a marked behavior. Perceivers may assume that the encoding of negative messages must therefore be purposeful. To save their self-esteem, however, participants attributed the cause of the intended negative behaviors to something outside of them, and this accounts for why the messages were not seen as directed toward the perceivers.

If this suggestion is plausible, why did the interactants in Manusov and Rodriguez' (1989) study give opposing explanations? As mentioned by the authors, the participants made their attributions orally to the study-assistants whom they knew well. The lack of anonymity, the fact that they talked about their interaction partner rather than writing their beliefs, and because the participants gave their account to those whom they knew and whose opinion mattered to them may have influenced the interpretations given. In particular, the respondents may have not only wanted to make attributions that were favorable for them, they may also have wanted to save the "face" of their interaction partner. To say that a person acted negatively on purpose would have made that individual look bad in the eyes of the assistant. In so doing, however, the participants may have made themselves appear better to their friends. The study could therefore have promoted the interpersonal function of attributions which occurs when people make their public interpretations in such a way as to

present themselves as socially responsible and benevolent (Forsyth, 1980).

Based on oral remarks made by participants in the present study, the above discussion may be a valid one. After completing the project, a number of participants chose to talk about the study with the experimenter and some of the confederates. Usually, the remarks that were made corresponded with the original predictions: that positive messages were viewed as more intentional and negative behaviors were seen as less intended. What they wrote down privately, however, contradicted what they claimed vocally. Publicly, the participants claimed that the confederates did not act negative intentionally; privately, the same individuals assumed more conscious malace by their interaction partners.

In addition to the possibility that some public presentation was at work in the Manusov and Rodriguez study, it is also reasonable to expect that the context of the present study as opposed to the bank setting accounts for the change in perceptions of intent. Although Manusov and Rodriguez argued that their participants' responses did not seem to reflect beliefs about the nature of bank employees' behavior, it is possible that the environment played a role. Although the participants interpreted the positive messages sent by the employees as directed at them, there is also an expectation that people in service professions are trained to act in a positive way. Violations from this manner are usually sanctioned negatively by the employees' superiors and would

therefore only be inadvertent "leaks." Conversely, in an informal conversation between peers, as in the present study, the expectation is that a person would act in a way that is more reflective of his or her "actual" feeling state.

A second unexpected finding was the trend toward seeing those who sent their nonverbal messages intentionally as being more competent than those confederates using less intended cues. Although the finding was only a trend ($p<.09$), its appearance suggests that, within interactions, those who concentrate on the behaviors they send may be judged more positively than those who focus on their internal state. The fact that the assessment was about competence and not general social evaluation intimates some recognition that competent communicators are more "in control" or aware of the message they are sending. This assumption remains speculative, however, particularly in light of its contradiction to some previous research.

Despite the above results, the findings of the present study must be interpreted with some caution. As mentioned, operationalizing intentionality is difficult and has led some scholars to argue that investigators should abandon looking at actual intent (Bowers & Bradac, 1984). This argument, however, seems too extreme. Despite the validity checks performed during the present study, however, it cannot be assumed that the differences between encoded spontaneous and intentional messages were clearly marked nor that either condition was "pure." At best,

the two conditions may have fallen somewhere along the continuum of intent, perhaps closer to one another than could measure differences adequately.

This study provides an attempt to operationalize intentionality within an interaction context. The task is not an easy one, however, and the present project may not have provided a valid measure of different degrees of intentionality. The author believes that the emphasis on purposeful behaviors (intentional) versus state of mind (unintentional) provides one possibility that taps differences in intent. The focus in the former condition was on the conscious manipulation of behavior while in the latter an internal state was altered consciously but its resulting behaviors were not. This differentiates the two modes of behavior, but may not do so as effectively as other methods. It may have been more effective, for example, to do all of the, for example, negative/unintentional conditions on a given day so that the confederates could be more realistically "in the mood." Similarly, it may have proved more adequate to train only half of the confederates to manipulate their behaviors so that the behaviors were even less conscious in the minds of the actors. Or, to avoid confederate differences, the unintentional manipulations could have been done in the first half of data collection, and then the confederates could have been trained in the intentional treatments. Clearly, operationalizing intent is a difficult issue, and future

research should face the challenge of providing other methodologies to measure differences in encoded intent.

What should not be clouded, however, is the finding that the affect displayed by an interactant had strong consequences on the evaluations made about the encoder. In particular, those who delivered positive messages over the course of an interaction were seen as more competent and rated higher levels of social evaluation than did those sending negative messages. While it has been concluded here that the affect played a more significant role than did intent in these evaluations, the above validity discussion should temper a firm acceptance of this argument. The importance of these findings, however, warrants further investigation of the potential evaluations based on both the valence and the intent of nonverbal messages.

The role of intent should also be explored further outside the affective domain. With a few exceptions (e.g., Allen & Atkinson, 1981), the operationalization of intent has been restricted to its role in the encoding and decoding of emotions. Other functions served by nonverbal behaviors (e.g., relational messages, impression management) may also be seen as encoded with various degrees of intent, and the perceptions and evaluations of intentionality behind these messages should be investigated.

Although the bulk of research regarding intentionality has dealt with encoding behaviors and the accuracy of "objective" decoding, the results of this study suggest that work must begin

to focus on how people decode intentionality within interactive contexts. According to Motley and Camden (1988), intentionally sent nonverbal messages are inherently different from spontaneous cues and should be investigated as diverse phenomena. It seems, however, that within interactions the degree of intent alone may not distinguish between nonverbal messages nor the evaluations of encoders based on their messages.

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